L: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1936) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3 Mirebalais

INTRODUCTION

THE VALLEY OF MIREBALAIS

THE TRAVELER comes suddenly on the valley of Mirebalais, as the road from the capital turns the shoulder of a hill. Long and narrow, the plain stretches before him with its many tones of green. Ahead is the village from which the valley takes its name, its metal roofs aglow in the sunlight, or reflecting the gray sky of the rainy season. Here and there appears a yellow, muddy slash made by the Artibonite River, while framing the valley are the mountains, rising one behind another as they complete its encirclement.

This first glimpse of the country gives no hint of a numerous population. It is as though this valley, like so many other things in Haiti, had set out to belie its own reality and, in this impression, at the very outset to point the lesson that the observer must seek well beneath the surface if he is to attain any understanding of the country and its people. For just as the unsettled appearance of this Haitian valley conceals numerous habitations, cultivated fields, and hard-working inhabitants, so the frenzy of Haitian religious rites is but a gloss upon disciplined ceremonialism, and the relatively placid everyday existence of the Haitian peasant but a mask behind which is waged a spiritual conflict that is his heritage from the dual sources of his traditions.

The commune of Mirebalais is situated in the heart of central Haiti. Lying some thirty-five miles from Port-au-Prince,

3: Courlander 9-9 (1937-1953) 1960 993 Haiti 993

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1. The Making of the Haitian

If you come to Haiti by sea, a way that is old-fashioned but full of magic, you are first aware of the island as a range of hills rising out of the water, and then, as you sail closer, new ranges come into view behind the first, and eventually you see that everything is mountains. The ranges pile up in the distance and finally lose themselves in the white morning mists that the country people call "snow." A Haitian proverb says, "Behind the mountains are mountains," and that is a true picture of the island.

In the summer after the rains have come, the hills and mountain slopes are green; but later they turn brown, and it is then that one notices the deep gashes where the earth has eroded and washed away into the valleys below and into the sea.

From the top of the range called La Selle ("The Saddle"), when the heavy mists form and settle across the highland valleys one sees nothing but the great rounded sugar-loaf peaks, which appear as floating islands in a vast sea of white.

From a distant ship in the Caribbean in the full glare of daylight it is hard to imagine that millions of people have made a home of these mountains. But at night it is different. The mountains are alive then with twinkling spots of light made by cooking fires, torches, and electric bulbs. For the hillsides as well as the coastal lowlands are dotted with tiny huts and homesteads, and the trails from one village to another criss-cross and lie on the land like a woven net. They lead from the high-up places down to the seacoast towns, through the waterless mesa of the frontier, through the pine forests of the southern range, through dense blankets of wild strawberries, wild-bamboo groves, and plantations of coffee. They find their way to the salt marshes, the rice fields of the Artibonite Valley, and the cities.

In the lowlands the days are hot and tropical. It is there the sugar cane, bananas, and plantains grow so lushly. In the mountains the people have

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2: Courtlander .9-6 (1957-1960) 1960 3V3 HAI 8V2

fires in their houses at night to keep out the damp cold that sweeps through the passes. And a man on the trail before dawn may wear a blanket over his head and carry a glowing ember with him for warmth.

On the south coast there are sometimes hurricanes and tidal waves, and many a small fishing boat and grass-covered house has been washed away in these storms. But the great mountains of the southern range deflect the winds, so that to the north their full fury is never known.

In the great Bay of Gonaïves the fishing boats sail out at night with the friendly winds that carry them to the fishing grounds of the island of La Gonave, and they return to the shore with their catches in the morning, or in the afternoon with the setting sun. The sailing boats from the tiny fishing village called Ville Matelot each day pass the deserted islet named Isle à Cabrit, where four Indian camps once stood. Today Isle à Cabrit is only a waterless, denuded place, a hunting ground for Carib and Arawak pottery and carved stone images.

In the frontier lakes of the Cul-de-Sac Plain there are wild ducks and alligators. Here the villagers fish with nets from rafts and dugout canoes. Now and then an iguana is seen, but there is little other game, because the edible wildlife of the country was long ago eaten by hungry people.

For the things that grow wild the Haitian is grateful—the avocado, the mango, the cashew, and the cotton which once planted produces again and again each year. He is grateful for the coconut palms, the calabash tree, the gourd vines, and the medicinal herbs that grow on every side. But the gifts of nature are not prolific. Most of the great stands of timber—lignum vitae, mahogany, dyewood and pine—have been cut away. Once fertile garden spots have dried up, and the soil that produces the yams, the pumpkins, the kaffir, and the rice is tired.

But the Haitian himself is not tired. He has suffered from malaria, yaws, and chronic hunger; yet out of the great old mountains of Haiti he has fashioned a way of life and a nation.

The Haitian of today was created out of the fabric of three continents—Africa, America, and Europe. He was shaped out of the plains and hills of Nigeria, Dahomey, and the Congo; the summers and winters of Europe; and the mountains and mountain mists of Haiti itself. He is the synthesis of the folk beliefs of the French and Spanish peasants, the Yoruba and the Arada of West Africa, and perhaps of the Carib Indians with whom he had close contact during his first days in the New World. He has brought into affinity the religious practices of Africa and the beliefs of the Church of Rome. He is outwardly simple and poor, but inwardly he is a complicated and rich man. He is rich in music, in the capacity for spiritual expression, in tradition, in folklore, and in memories. He has been able

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1. *The Marbial River, a branch of the Cavaillon, in southern Haiti. Twenty-eight thousand people, many of them runners or sharecroppers, depend upon agriculture in the Marbial Valley for their livelihood.*

J: Courlander B-5 (1937-1955) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3
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[783] 37. *A small graveyard in the mountains at Furcy. The little alcoves in the tombs are for food offerings on special anniversaries.*

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[776] 38. *Stone and brick covering of spring on Morne l'Hôpital believed to have been constructed in colonial times. Many persons have testified that here the voices of the lost have been heard bubbling up with the water.*

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1955) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

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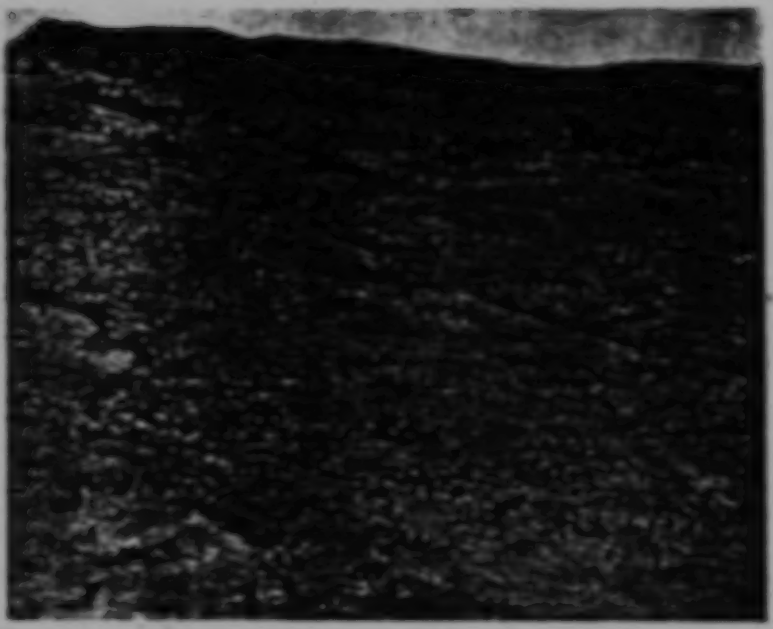

[139] 2. *Haiti's "Pine Forest," once a dense woodland, is an expanse of mountain terrain denuded of most of its trees and scarred by gullies. The timber was cut primarily for fuel for limekilns.*

A: Coverlander B-1 (1937-1955) 1964 BV3 Rack BV3
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8. Coverlander, members Main. Warrior players on the right; flag of the enemy on the left.

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13. *Donkeys with a load of charcoal. Where the terrain is not too rugged, donkeys or small horses do some of the carrying. The marketing of charcoal has helped to diminish the mountains of their forests.*

3: Leyburn 2-4.5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

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3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
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3: Leyburn Z-4,5 (no date) 1966
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tiny communities, some of them designating "villages" of only four or five houses. For numbers of peasants hidden away in the valleys or on mountain farms, the only contact with the larger world comes through visits to the nearest market town—which itself may count only a thousand souls. The peasant is thus effectively isolated. The American Financial Adviser to the Government has estimated the average *annual* income of the Haitian at $20 a head.[8] The smallness of the sum limits the material contacts of the peasant with the outside world. Rural schools are few,[9] consequently all but a small percentage of the rising generation is growing up illiterate. Lack of mental stimulus completes the isolation. Bound to the soil by the need of wresting a livelihood from rocky, gullied, and increasingly unproductive land, harassed by ill-health, and governed by a group whose own security would be threatened by improving his lot, it is little wonder that the peasant is unprogressive, or that he struggles along at a bare subsistence level."[10]

Haiti is rural and agricultural, then, with a population density of about 250 per square mile. The people, living without machine industry and with very little foreign trade, must get their living from 10,000 square miles, not of lush tropical soil but of rocky, mountainous country which, after a century and a half of poor farming, has been stripped of most of its forests and much of its topsoil.

A glance at a relief map of the West Indies would show clearly that the islands are the tops of a mountain range, whose lowlands were long since submerged by the Caribbean Sea. Looked at from above, Haiti seems a jumbled mass of mountains running in all directions.[11] Down their slopes flow many small streams which after

8. Dr. W. W. Cumberland, cited by Paul H. Douglas, "The American Occupation of Haiti," *Political Science Quarterly*, XLII (1927), 258.

9. The average monthly salary of $13 (until recently only $6) for rural schoolteachers would not draw many wide-awake young men, even if schoolhouses existed for classes. The salary, indeed, is so small that only inferior persons are attracted, often men who know little more than their pupils. See chap. XV, 3.

10. Mrs. Blair Niles, in *Black Haiti* (New York, 1926), pp. 185–186, tells of a prisoner who preferred to remain in jail rather than be freed. "When he gets out," she quotes the officer as saying, "he'll be in again. You'll see. Here he gets nine cents a day for food, an' that's more than the average Haitian ever has."

11. One can well believe the story (told by Ebenezer D. Bassett, *Haiti* [Washington, 1893], p. 3) of the English admiral who, asked by George III for a description of the island, crumpled a sheet of paper, threw it on the table, and said: "Sire, Haiti looks like that." The same tale is told of Puerto Rico, with a Spanish admiral speaking to Queen Isabella.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

183 rains become torrents, washing away crops and soil. Brooks which run most of the year the Haitians dignify by the name of "rivière"; not even the largest, however—the Artibonite, which drains over a fifth of the country—is navigable for anything above a rowboat. The second largest "river," Les Trois Rivières, is only 96 kilometres long. Many of the smaller streams disappear into sinkholes or caves in limestone, veritable lost rivers. Even some of the lakes are ephemeral.

133 311 175 [134] Most of the best land of the country lies in its few plains flanking the mountains near the coasts, or extending like wedges into the mountainous regions. In the northeast in the country back of Cap-Haïtien is the Plaine du Nord; here in colonial times were the most flourishing of the French plantations, the palatial residences, and the slaves who in 1791 began the insurrection which ultimately led to Haiti's independence. In the middle region are the Artibonite Plain near the coast, and the Central Plain back of the Black Mountains. Eastward from Port-au-Prince, the capital, is the Cul-de-Sac; and in the southwestern peninsula is the small plain of Les Cayes. All over the country in French days sugar cane grew in abundance, making white men wealthy. The irrigation systems have long since disappeared; fertilizer is far too costly for use; trees have been cut down to make room for hundreds of tiny farms to support the increasing population.

133 134 Not even all the plains are naturally productive. Many of them, on the contrary, are arid, sterile, and forbidding, covered with cacti and other spiny plants. Indeed, the most arid areas of Haiti, including its salt marshes, are lowlands.

13 Although the country is wholly in the tropics, the usual preconceived notion of the tropics does not apply. There are no impenetrable rain forests or jungles, no wild beasts, and very few snakes.

132 Because of the mountains, there are wide differences in rainfall, soil, and vegetation, within a short distance. Occasional hurricanes do great damage to shipping and the water fronts. Infrequent droughts sometimes last for two or three months. Hailstorms that damage growing crops are fairly common. Taken as a whole, the country has an ample but not heavy rainfall; coming generally from the east and northeast, the trade winds strike the high ridges in the north and there deposit the greater part of their moisture in the Plaine du Nord. By the time they have passed down the western slope and across the Central Plain they are dried and rarefied, so that this region becomes